

## DEVIANT MODERNISM

*Sexual and textual errancy in T. S. Eliot,  
James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*

This original study re-evaluates central texts of the modernist canon – Eliot’s early poetry including *The Waste Land*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* – by examining sexual energies and identifications in them that are typically regarded as perverse. According to modern cultural discourses and psychosexual categorizations, these deviant desires and identifications feminize men or tend to render them homosexual. Colleen Lamos’s analysis of the operations of gender and sexuality in these texts reveals conflicts concerning the definition of masculine heterosexuality which cut across the aesthetics of modernism. She argues that canonical male modernism, far from being a monolithic entity with a coherently conservative political agenda, is in fact the site of errant impulses and unresolved struggles. What emerges is a reconsideration of modernist literature as a whole and a recognition of the heterogeneous forces that formed and deformed modernism.

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*To Dominique*



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## *Abbreviations*

<i>ASG</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy</i> . New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934.
<i>AVP</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>Ara Vós Prec</i> . London: Ovid Press, 1920.
<i>CC</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings</i> . 1965. Reprint, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.
<i>CPP</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950</i> . New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971.
<i>CW</i>	James Joyce. <i>The Critical Writings of James Joyce</i> . Ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking, 1959.
<i>D</i>	James Joyce. <i>Dubliners</i> . New York: Penguin, 1976.
<i>F</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Draft including the Annotations of Ezra Pound</i> . Ed. Valerie Eliot. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
<i>FW</i>	James Joyce. <i>Finnegans Wake</i> . New York: Viking, 1939. References are to page and line number.
<i>I</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917</i> . Ed. Christopher Ricks. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1996.
<i>ICS</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes toward a Definition of Culture</i> . New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949.
<i>L</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot</i> . Vol. 1 (1898-1922). Ed. Valerie Eliot. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.
<i>Lj</i>	James Joyce. <i>Letters of James Joyce</i> . Vol. 1, ed. Stuart Gilbert. New York: Viking 1957, 1966. Vols. 2 and 3, ed. Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking, 1966.
<i>OPP</i>	T. S. Eliot. <i>On Poetry and Poets</i> . New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957.

- ORR* Marcel Proust. *On Reading Ruskin*. Tr. and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
- P* James Joyce. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. Chester G. Anderson. New York: Viking, 1964.
- PE* James Joyce. "Poems" and "Exiles." Ed. J. C. C. Mays. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992.
- R* Marcel Proust. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. 3 vols. New York: Random House, 1982. References are to volume and page number.
- SE* T. S. Eliot. *Selected Essays*. 1951 3rd. edn. Reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1991.
- SL* James Joyce. *Selected Letters of James Joyce*. Ed. Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking, 1975.
- SP* T. S. Eliot. *Selected Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
- SW* T. S. Eliot. *The Sacred Wood*. 1920. Reprint, London: Methuen, 1960.
- U* James Joyce. *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*. Ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior. New York: Random House, 1986. References are to chapter and line number.
- UPUC* T. S. Eliot. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. 1933. Reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- V* T. S. Eliot. *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*. Clark and Turnbull Lectures. Ed. Ronald Schuchard. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.

## CHAPTER I

### *Straightening out literary criticism: T. S. Eliot and error*

Most of us are somewhat impure and apt to confuse issues; hence the justification of writing books about books, in the hope of straightening things out.

T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*

Every emission of speech is always . . . under an inner compulsion to err.

Jacques Lacan, *Seminar*

T. S. Eliot's critical writings are a consistent, sustained attempt to identify and weed out error from the practice of literary criticism and to establish normative criteria for English poetry and poetic drama. In his words, Eliot was always trying to "straighten things out," yet his own works are energized by errant tendencies that are bound up in various ways with the norms which they violate. Although Eliot rarely hints at sexual perversion, the types of error that he censures are closely implicated with errant sexuality and, more broadly, with transgressions of social order. In many instances, Eliot wanted his readers to infer the larger moral, political, social, and even sexual significance of his literary criticism. Indeed, gender and sexual errancy are crucial to his judgments of error, even those that seem purely aesthetic.

Eliot's often local assessments of the mistakes of poets and critics possess a general, theoretical coherence. In order to demonstrate their systematic character as well as their larger ramifications, I have grouped Eliot's judgments of literary error in his critical prose into four categories which I term *perversion*, *inversion*, *impure mingling*, and *dissemination*. By proposing these general headings, I aim both to follow Eliot's intentions and to tease out the unintended implications of his own arguments. The kinds of error that typically concern Eliot are (1) perverse egotism or "emotionalism," as opposed to the properly "impersonal" character of poetry; (2) inversions of a literary or natural order, including linguistic,

poetic, social, and sexual hierarchies; (3) the impure mingling of categories, especially epistemological and aesthetic ones; and (4) the dispersion of what should be a unified whole, whether a text, an author's oeuvre, or a social body – even the dissipation of literary value in general. This chapter is organized around these four kinds of error, with individual sections devoted to each type.

The problem of error in Eliot's critical writings is engaged in a paradoxical economy. Like the Judeo-Christian theodicy that underlies it, this economy is driven by the demand to exclude impurities and, hence, is engaged in continually separating and expelling errors. Yet because error arises from within and masks itself as truth, it is an ever-present, inherent possibility, making the task of correction an endless struggle toward a transcendent goal. Eliot's persistent attempts to differentiate good from bad poetry and to determine the appropriate limits and functions of literary criticism thus rest upon his assumption of a prelapsarian poetic ideal as well as upon his belief in a standard of taste.

The economy of error in Eliot's criticism is marked by its recursivity. Inasmuch as the mistakes that he tries to root out of the works of others appear in his own, the truth of his corrective discourse is bound up with the desires and practices that he wishes to cast out. In short, Eliot's critical texts are grounded in a disavowal of the very forces that energize them. His literary judgments depend upon the exclusion of what he believed were violations of gender and sexual norms as well as guard against the impure motives of authors and readers and the relativization of literary value. These exclusions return within his own work as fructive tendencies; far from occasional blunders on his part or exceptions to the rule, Eliot's own errors are constructive and, indeed, constitutive of his critical enterprise. Specifically, Eliot's corrective project is driven by the denial of a host of related psychosexual forces whose power derives from their negation. Rather than simply claiming that Eliot's work is motivated by repressed sexual desires, though, I argue that those desires are constituted as such, in their dangerous potency, through repeated disavowals such as those we see in Eliot's texts.

Eliot's continual attempts to purify poetry and criticism hinge upon the symbolic distinction between inside and outside, between interior integrity and exterior errancy. However, because error necessarily maintains a negative relation to that from which it has been abjected, the former inevitably reappears within the body of Eliot's text. According to Jacques Derrida, "the possibility of the negative . . . is in fact a struc-

tural possibility” of every argument so that “failure is an essential risk,” yet philosophers typically try to “exclude that risk as accidental [and] exterior . . . [to] the phenomenon being considered.” “On the contrary,” Derrida asks, “is this risk rather its internal and positive condition of possibility? Is that outside its inside, the very force and law of its emergence?”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Eliot’s attempt to exclude error from literary discourse confirms and draws strength from the errant impulses that he denounces.

Eliot’s remedial project is also an effort to assert his critical authority by means of a self-validating, self-citational rhetoric whose success depends upon that indispensable error, tautology. His aim in demarcating error is to establish literary authority, especially the canon of the English literary tradition as he saw it, and to define the norms of literary criticism. Both of these goals implicitly call for a justification of his own authority. When Eliot comes face-to-face with the problem of the validity of his judgment, he resorts to Humean and Kantian claims for taste, buttressed by the supposed necessity of aesthetic value as a regulative ideal. Despite – or perhaps because of – the circular nature of such arguments, Eliot’s rhetoric was remarkably successful. By implying what is defined (the normative value of poetry as he saw it) within the terms of the definition, Eliot performatively authorizes the very norms that he seeks to establish. Likewise, Eliot produces the effect of his own authority by means of this reiterative practice, citing as the basis of his authority the literary norms and canonical texts that his critical practice also defines and regulates.<sup>2</sup> Far from being an anomalous “error,” Eliot’s tautological claims for literary value and the validity of his literary judgments conform precisely to what Judith Butler, expanding on Derrida’s concept of citationality, describes as the inevitable constitution of juridical authority through repeated attributions of power or enactments of it. The law of literature is, in Butler’s phrasing, “fortified and idealized as the law only to the extent that it is reiterated as the law, produced as the law . . . by the very citations it is said to command.”<sup>3</sup> Eliot’s use of poetic allusions, which I will examine in chapter 2, is thus closely allied to the logic and rhetoric of his critical prose, both of which rely for their performative effects upon specific exclusions.

Eliot’s tireless determination to separate truth from error, to set the boundaries of criticism, to distinguish, in his words, “genuine” from “sham” poetry, and to rank poets in their proper order founders on the bivalence of every discourse on truth. The opposition between truth and error, like other binarisms such as good/evil and pure/impure, depends

upon the absolute exclusion of the inferior term, yet the excluded term must also be presupposed as a deficiency – as a pathological, depraved, or aberrant version of the true, the good, or the pure. In other words, the operation of the true/false binary requires, on the one hand, the abjection of the false from the realm of the true (e.g., “genuine poetry”) and, on the other hand, the continued existence of the false as a flaw within that realm. The asymmetrical, hierarchical opposition between truth and error in Eliot’s conceptual framework demands the ongoing purgation of errors that arise within literary discourse – an infinite inquisition. The boundary demarcating the interior of truth from its contaminating exterior must be constantly redrawn because error springs from within, as an internal alien, a fifth column, or, as in William Cowper’s “The Progress of Error,” an “insinuating worm” who “successfully conceals her loathsome form.”<sup>4</sup> Error seems perversely fecund, constantly breeding new errors as though it were a female monster. Indeed, error has often been imagined as such in English poetry. Like Cowper’s “serpent error,” Spenser’s “Foul Error” in *The Faerie Queene* is an “ugly monster,”

Half like a serpent horribly display’d,  
But th’other half did woman’s shape retain,  
Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain.  
    . . . of her there bred  
A thousand young ones, which she daily fed,  
Sucking upon her pois’nous dugs. (l. lines 14–15)<sup>5</sup>

Insofar as any error is a crippling deviation from a proper norm, it is also an enabling waywardness, opening the possibility of multiple, alternative versions, or of what Michel Foucault calls “reverse discourses.”<sup>6</sup> This polyvalence of error is inscribed in its tangled etymological roots. The word *error* entered English from the Old French *errer*, which meant both “to rove or wander, especially in search of adventure,” and “to stray from what is right.” Margaret Soltan points out that “the cultural values attached to the general metaphor of errancy have always been dramatically gender-linked,” so that “the errant man errs in search of truth and goodness, while the errant woman errs into evil.”<sup>7</sup> The former sense is retained in the modern English term *errantry* which, according to *Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, means “wandering, especially in quest of knightly adventure,” and is differentiated from *errancy*, as “a state, practice, or instance of erring.” However, the ambiguity is preserved in *errant*, which signifies both “traveling” and “straying outside the proper bounds” or “deviating from a standard, erring.”<sup>8</sup>

This etymological confusion reflects the longstanding suspicion that straying from the path of truth might possibly lead to better knowledge, a suspicion that Eliot would have classified as a romantic mistake but which constitutes a persistent dilemma in Christian theology – specifically, the problem of the nature and origin of evil. Jonathan Dollimore has offered a cogent analysis of Augustinian theodicy, focusing on the twin paradoxes that sin originates within the divine order that it subverts and that man is created desiring that which is sinful.<sup>9</sup> Dollimore traces these paradoxes through John Milton, for whom good and evil, in Milton's words, "grow up together almost inseparable; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evil and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd"; indeed, "we know good only by means of evil."<sup>10</sup>

Eliot's attempts to distinguish truth from error are involved in a similar dilemma. Dollimore's term for this quandary is the "paradoxical perverse," which he argues is a phenomenon not restricted to theology but which pervades Western thought and culture, especially concerning sexuality. The "paradoxical perverse" embraces two paradoxes: first, that perversion is "rooted in the true . . . while being . . . the utter contradiction of the true," and, second, that perversion is "often perceived as at once utterly alien to what it threatens, and yet, mysteriously inherent within it" (121). These paradoxes produce what Dollimore calls a "perverse dynamic" with the potential "to destabilize [or] to provoke dis coherence" within a social or epistemological field (121). The problem of error in Eliot's critical prose manifests contradictions whose (il)logic is similar to the paradoxes outlined by Dollimore. For instance, in "What Is a Classic?" Eliot claims that the heterogeneity of the English language is an essential flaw, preventing it from ever producing a classic work of literature, yet that defect is also the source of its fruitful production of nonclassic texts.

In this chapter I will examine the full range of Eliot's literary criticism, including his early, uncollected journalism and the recently published Clark and Turnbull Lectures. While respecting the particular contexts of Eliot's essays, this study is organized around the concepts of error employed therein and, hence, does not offer a chronological or developmental narrative. Despite the occasional nature of much of his critical production, Eliot's assessments of literary error possess a systematic coherence.<sup>11</sup> Although there are all sorts of ways in which a poet or critic may go wrong, those ways fit into certain logical and rhetorical patterns. To put it in another fashion, Eliot's various judgments of error share

important “family resemblances.” The four “families” or general categories I have identified – perversion, inversion, impurity, and dissemination – are a heuristic construction designed to show that the problem of error in Eliot’s critical oeuvre forms a web of intersecting and sometimes contradictory but nonetheless interconnected sets of issues. These categories, each of which I will treat in turn, are themselves clusters of related, overlapping ideas whose boundaries are permeable.

The typology of error I am proposing selects and foregrounds certain patterns among Eliot’s recurrent aesthetic, religious, social, political, and sexual concerns. Specifically, I argue that Eliot’s literary norms are fully implicated with sexual norms and, thus, that textual and sexual erring in his critical discourse are mutually constitutive. Perversion, inversion, impurity, and dissemination are significant nodes in the network of error that traverses Eliot’s critical texts, condensing potent yet disavowed, errant energies. Finally, an analysis of these ways of going astray enables us to situate the conceptual structure of Eliot’s writings within the larger, historical context of twentieth-century political and cultural discourses, and is especially relevant for current debates concerning Eliot’s conservatism and anti-Semitism.

#### PERVERSION

Eliot’s early essays are preoccupied with what I am calling perversion, following the traditional definition of the term as “a turning aside from truth or right, a diversion to an improper use” (*OED*). Poets and critics whose attention is drawn away from the poetry itself to the personality or the emotions of the poet have, in his view, perverted poetry’s true purpose. Egotistical indulgence in “self-expression” or “emotionalism” on the part of poets is “impure,” in Eliot’s words, as are the practices of critics such as A. G. Swinburne, Arthur Symonds, and Walter Pater, who read poetry in order to savor their own feelings and “impressions” (*SW* 3, 13).

Eliot sometimes uses the term “perversion,” as in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where he describes the “perverse” effects of the pursuit of novelty in poetry. Here, I employ it to designate a type of error, repeatedly criticized by Eliot, characterized by a straying from the object of poetry to the subjective interests of readers and writers. Among the cognate terms for perversion are thus deviation, diversion, digression, and wandering. Perversion also typically implies an inversion of natural or instituted hierarchies, yet it has a specific significance in



Eliot's criticism as a deflection from the proper aims of poetry in favor of the poet's or critic's personal desires. The effects of such perversion include effeminate decadence, moral vice, egotistical pride, and ethical relativism.

The diversion of poets and critics from their rightful goal, turning instead toward nonpoetic topics or dwelling excessively upon their feelings rather than "working them up into poetry," bears a striking resemblance to Freud's concept of perversion. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud claims that "perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the immediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim."<sup>12</sup> In the first instance, this extension or transgression involves the choice of an "inappropriate" sexual object, such as the foot or someone of the same sex. The poets and critics whom Eliot censures may be said to have chosen the wrong object, such as the personality of the poet, or to "linger over . . . immediate" pleasures at the expense of the development of their taste. He argues, in the "Note on the Development of 'Taste' in Poetry," that while, as youthful readers, we may feel a passionate attachment toward certain poetry, "absorbed" as we are in our own "delightful feelings," the "mature stage of enjoyment of poetry comes when we cease to identify ourselves with the poet we happen to be reading" and are able "to distinguish between the genuine and the sham" in poetry (*UPUC* 26). Freud's ideal of mature, reproductive sexuality and Eliot's ideal of mature, objective taste share a teleological structure in which error is figured as dalliance or waywardness.

The locus classicus of Eliot's condemnation of this error is "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he formulates his famous "impersonality theory of poetry." Eliot's claim that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (*SE* 17), has been subjected to countless critiques, many of which reflexively apply Eliot's criteria for "genuine poetry" and "honest criticism" back upon himself, discovering that Eliot commits the very mistakes that he decries. Thus, for instance, Maud Ellmann argues that "in the second half [of the essay] he rehabilitates the personality that he had humbled in the first."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, later in life, Eliot occasionally admitted the autobiographical impulse in his poetry, notably and perhaps disingenuously in the remark attributed to him that *The Waste Land* "was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" (*F* 1).

The impersonality thesis seems designed to fail, and the artist's or critic's mask of self-abnegation seems to invite exposure of the seething and possibly seedy demands of the personality beneath. The success of Eliot's theory may reside not in the efficacy of its prohibition but in the sense of a temptation barely escaped and of overwhelming desires scarcely contained. Just as Eliot's poet-critic acquires authority through ostensible self-effacement, so, too, he dallies with egotistical lusts through renouncing them. In short, the disavowal of the expression of one's feelings may be another way of indulging them, through the act of renunciation. If the denial of a pleasure is, in effect, a negative affirmation, Eliot's essay perversely attests to the allure of precisely what it rejects.

Among the several moments in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which Eliot criticizes the improper treatment of emotions in poetry, the following passage is a representative instance as well as an especially telling example of Eliot's rhetoric.

One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the *perverse*. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not actual emotions at all. (*SE* 21; emphasis mine)

The terminological slippages in this quotation render the relation between "feeling" and "emotion," in Stephen Clark's words, "permanently insoluble."<sup>14</sup> Yet it is precisely such slippages that have made passages like this persuasive to many of Eliot's readers, along with his rhetorical habit of building an argument not by logical syllogism but by the repetition and accretive heightening of the same point until the aggregate force of his assertion makes it seem self-evident.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Eliot writes, "one error . . . of *eccentricity* . . . is to seek for *new* human emotions," the newness of these emotions restating and reinforcing their errant eccentricity. Eliot piles on the eccentricity by adding that such a poet searches "for *novelty in the wrong place*," although, in his pursuit of novelty, the eccentric poet is already wayward. It thus comes as no surprise that the eccentric poet "discovers the *perverse*," which is another term for the eccentric, for that which has turned away from the normal or "ordinary." Eliot's assertion here is, strictly speaking, tautological, yet his rhetorical error promotes the putative truthfulness of his claim by means of its performative reiteration.

Many of Eliot's essays subsequent to "Tradition and the Individual

Talent" continue his critique of perversion as a swerve from what he believed was the proper object of poetry – the poem as an aesthetic object – toward the expression of the poet's personality. Among the instances of such perversity in Eliot's critical prose is John Donne. Although Donne is usually remembered as the exemplar of what Eliot called the "unified sensibility" of the early seventeenth century, in whose poetry "there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling" (*SE* 286), in an essay published only five years after "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot offers him as an example of "personality" gone awry. In "Lancelot Andrewes" (1926), Eliot compares Donne's sermons unfavorably to those of Andrewes, and he describes the pernicious effects of Donne's rhetoric upon his audience.

Donne is a "personality" in the sense in which Andrewes is not: his sermons, one feels, are a "means of self-expression." He is constantly finding an object which shall be adequate to his feelings; Andrewes is wholly absorbed in the object and therefore responds with the adequate emotion . . . Donne . . . belonged to the class of persons . . . who seek refuge in religion from the tumults of a strong emotional temperament which can find no complete satisfaction elsewhere. He is not wholly without kinship to Huysmans . . . He is dangerous only for those who find in his sermons an indulgence of their sensibility, or for those who, fascinated by "personality" in the romantic sense of the word – for those who find in "personality" an ultimate value – forget that in the spiritual hierarchy there are places higher than that of Donne. (*SE* 351–52)

The force of Eliot's condemnation of Donne is striking and explicitly links personal "self-expression" to moral vice, fin-de-siècle French decadence, and even sorcery.<sup>16</sup> "About Donne there hangs the shadow of the impure motive . . . He is a little of the religious spellbinder, the Reverend Billy Sunday of his time, the flesh-creeper, the sorcerer of emotional orgy" (*SE* 345).

Eliot's scathing criticism of Donne underscores what he saw as the danger of indulging in emotions at the expense of rational, objective religious belief, an indulgence that stems from ethical relativism and that leads to sexual depravity. In *After Strange Gods*, published in the following year, Eliot argues that, when each man is his own moral authority, "*personality* becomes a thing of alarming importance" (58). Thomas Hardy is an "example of a powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs"; "unhindered" by moral "restraint," Hardy, like Donne, is not a "wholesome or edifying" influence (59). The perverse sexual implications of the writer's

gratification of his “feelings” are further evident when Eliot turns to feminine – and effeminate – writing.

The historically overdetermined, even banal association of women with the expression of emotions is tacit in Eliot’s essays, unlike those of his male contemporaries such as T. E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound. With the exception of his elegy on Marie Lloyd, the beloved music-hall entertainer, Eliot very rarely mentions women in his critical work, and women writers even less.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the clearest sense of what Eliot considers “feminine” art is his remark in *After Strange Gods* on Katherine Mansfield’s story “Bliss”. Her story is

brief, poignant, and . . . slight . . . The story is limited to [the wife’s] sudden change of feeling, and the moral and social ramifications are outside [its] terms of reference. As the material is limited in this way . . . it is what I believe would be called feminine. (*ASG* 38; emphasis Eliot’s)

In a word, feminine writing is “limited” to emotions. Although in his critical prose Eliot is circumspect, his letters exhibit a frankly hostile attitude toward literary women, including scattered vituperations against female literary authority and the “feminization of modern society” in general.<sup>18</sup> Writing to Pound (15 April 1915), Eliot complains of the feminization of literary study in American universities, where it is reduced to the contemplation of

How to Appreciate the Hundred Best Paintings, the Maiden Aunt and the Social Worker. Something might be said . . . about the Evil Influence of Virginity on American Civilization . . . [L]iterature has rights of its own which extend beyond Uplift and Recreation. Of course it is imprudent to sneer at the monopolisation of literature by women. (*L* 96)

As we will see in the following chapter, Eliot’s sneer at powerful literary women is especially pertinent in regard to his relationship to his mother, herself a poet and dramatist, and contrasts sharply with his published remarks concerning the slightness of feminine writing. In his “London Letter” to the *Dial* of July 1921, Eliot compares strong male artists, such as James Joyce, to “a more feminine type [which] . . . makes its art by feeling and by contemplating the feeling rather than the object which has excited it” (216–17). The examples he offers are the work of his friend Virginia Woolf and of Walter Pater.

Pater repeatedly figures in Eliot’s essays as the bad example, as the perverted son of Matthew Arnold’s doctrine of culture – in short, as the nadir of effete aestheticism. According to Eliot, “‘Art for art’s sake’ is the offspring of Arnold’s Culture; and we can hardly venture to say that it

is even a perversion of Arnold's doctrine, considering how very vague and ambiguous that doctrine is" (*SE* 439). Pater's error – including his "flirtation with the liturgy," thereby rendering its solemnities "sensuous" (*SE* 441) – is similar to Donne's mistake. Moreover, Pater's "perversion" of Arnoldian doctrine is closely linked to the notion of inversion, as we will see in the next section. "Eliot's trashing of Pater," according to Richard Poirier, was in part due to Eliot's distaste for fluidity in general, as opposed to cut-and-dried analytic distinctions: "the spectre of tides, of things being made to flow into one another, was especially disturbing to Eliot."<sup>19</sup> Eliot's letters confirm his disgust at feminine fluids – a topic that I take up in the following chapter on Eliot's early poetry. In an unpublished letter to Conrad Aiken (4 January 1926), responding to Aiken's congratulations on the publication of *Poems 1920–1925*, Eliot sent "a page torn out of the *Midwives Gazette*," underlining the words "*blood, mucous, and shreds of mucous*" and "*purulent offensive discharge*."<sup>20</sup> Eliot's borrowings from Pater and his repression of that debt have been amply documented by Poirier and Perry Meisel, while Louis Menand has shown the continuity between Pater's writings and *The Waste Land*.<sup>21</sup>

The virulence of Eliot's disavowal of Pater may also have had to do with his revulsion at the effeteness and homosexuality linked to the latter. Eliot's association of Pater with homosexual perversion is evident in the drafts of *The Waste Land* where Fresca, sitting in her bath, reads Pater along with the openly gay John Addington Symonds and the closeted Vernon Lee (the pseudonym of Violet Paget): "Fresca was baptised in a soapy sea / Of Symonds – Walter Pater – Vernon Lee" (*F* 41). Although Pater did not consider himself homosexual, the same-sex eroticism of his aesthetic doctrine was apparent to many of his readers, contrary to Richard Jenkins's claim, and was the subject of controversy at the time.<sup>22</sup> The perversion whose seed lay in Arnold's insistently moral writings and which came to flower in Pater, a perversion that combines effeminacy with emotional, even sensuous self-indulgence, is never named by Eliot. Indeed, he did not have to, for Pater, together with Plato, Swinburne, Walt Whitman, and Oscar Wilde, was one of the touchstones of the love that famously dared not speak its name in England in the early twentieth century, a love that was quickly becoming synonymous with the term "perversion." The slippery slope that Eliot deplored from Arnold's "sweetness and light" to Paterian Hellenism, aesthetic decadence, and, finally, sexual perversion was central to contemporary debates concerning the supposed effeminacy of art and what Eliot called the "monopolisation of literature by women."<sup>23</sup> Given the

challenge to male artists by a "philistine" industrial economy, by feminist political demands, and by the late Victorian cult of manliness in the service of the empire, Eliot's disavowal of Pater is less a sign of his personal refusal to acknowledge his sources than a historical symptom of Anglo-American cultural anxiety concerning heterosexual masculinity and the uneasy proximity of the artist to the newly designated "homosexual."

The straight man to Pater and his kind is Aristotle. Unlike Plato, the icon of Victorian Hellenism and the inspiration for Pater's erotic aesthetic, Aristotle represents a virile, rationalist Greek ideal for Eliot. He appears in Eliot's early essays as the "perfect critic" whose attention is not diverted from poetry to the poet. "Aristotle had none of these impure desires to satisfy; in whatever sphere of interest, he looked solely and steadfastly at the object" (*SW* 11). Aristotle's analytical method possesses an ethical value for Eliot as a stepping-stone to ascetic purity. "The end of the enjoyment of poetry is a pure contemplation from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed; thus we aim to see the object as it really is" and, through "a labour of the intelligence, . . . to attain that stage of vision *amor intellectualis Dei*" (*SW* 14-15). Aristotle occupies a position similar to that which Eliot will give to Dante and Virgil, as a transcendent, "classic" figure, remote from modern concerns, whose literary worth and moral virtue are uncontested. The conjunction of literary, religious, and sexual values in Eliot's critical appraisals is even more apparent when we turn to his attack on the type of mistake that I call inversion.

#### INVERSION

Eliot sharply criticizes the practice of poets and critics who, in his judgment, elevate the image over the idea, the sound of words over their sense, or language in general over the objects to which it refers. Such reversals of the normal order of language have historically been linked to a host of political, social, sexual, and moral inversions. Eliot did not view a topsy-turvy world as a carnivalesque fantasy but as a twisted nightmare, much as Francis Bacon saw the overthrow of natural or instituted hierarchies: "For . . . women to govern men, sons the fathers, slaves freemen, are . . . total violations and perversions of the laws of nature and nations."<sup>24</sup> Although Bacon uses the term "perversion," I prefer "inversion" as a designation for the linguistic disorder that Eliot diagnoses in order to retain its association with a specific form of sexual

deviation: the inversion of (hetero)sexual desire and gender identity in the body of the invert. By the turn of the century, “inversion” had become the standard sexological term for what was sometimes called homosexuality,<sup>25</sup> while it continued to suggest an insidious, general social and ethical corruption.

Eliot does not employ the word “inversion” in his criticism, yet it is an apt heading for the type of error that he frequently denounced that turns upside down literary, social, and sexual norms. The linguistic inversions that he reproaches are not only structurally parallel to the inversion of moral values, but these two maladies stand in a mutual cause-effect relation in Eliot’s text and hence are indissolubly fused. Moral decadence gives rise to decadent writing, and vice versa. The authors whom Eliot censures – Swinburne, Pater, Seneca, Donne, Poe, and Valéry – are the aesthetic equivalent of the sinners execrated by St. Paul, who

worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator . . . For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; . . . and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. (Rom. 1:25–27; KJV)

Although Eliot does not charge these writers with sexual inversion, the taint of this vice colors his critique of those who abandon the “natural use” of words. The predictable orthodoxy of Eliot’s judgments renders all the more surprising his relatively straightforward and sympathetic remarks concerning Alfred Tennyson’s love for Arthur Hallam as expressed in *In Memoriam*. Far from condemning the poem, Eliot’s sensitive reading of it suggests that, as in the case of the idealized, “personal kinship” between a younger and an older poet, Eliot could envision non-phobically certain passionate male same-sex relations as long as they were literary and not physical. However, Eliot denounces the subversion of literary value by those whose concomitant moral contamination is often signified by the hint of homosexuality.

Swinburne is Eliot’s touchstone for linguistic inversion with its attendant ethical degeneracy.<sup>26</sup> In “Swinburne as Poet” (1920), Eliot attacks the “morbidity of . . . language” in his poetry, in contrast to “language in a healthy state [which] presents the object” as it really is. The poet’s error stems from his unhealthy interest in words themselves, apart from their reference to objects or to a definite meaning. “In the verse of Swinburne . . . the object has ceased to exist, . . . the meaning is merely

the hallucination of meaning, [and] . . . language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment" (*SE* 327). In the dreamy hothouse of Swinburne's poetry, words are torn from their natural soil and yet are "very much alive" with a "singular life of [their] own," as though fed by their own decadent impulses. Indeed, Swinburne's poetry is so artificial that it is worse than a "sham"; "It would only be so if you could produce or suggest something that it pretends to be and is not. The world of Swinburne does not depend upon some other world which it simulates" (*SE* 327) but, abandoning mimetic responsibility, exists in a narcissistic, autoerotic realm of its own.

Eliot suggests the impure desires that lay at the root of Swinburne's malady when he says that "it is, in fact, the word that gives him the thrill, not the object. When you take to pieces any verse of Swinburne, you find always that the object was not there – only the word" (*SE* 326). Swinburne's "thrill" at the sounds of words, and his consequent transposition of the proper relation between sound and sense, is similar to the "emotional kick" that, Eliot claims, Arnold unwittingly counseled his readers to get out of Christianity "without the bother of believing it," a sensuous self-indulgence that led eventually to "*Marius the Epicurean*, and finally *De Profundis*" (*SE* 434–35). The allusions to Pater and Wilde plainly insinuate the sexual inversion to which the inversion of word and object leads, an insinuation that is reinforced later in the "Arnold and Pater" essay when Eliot again drops Wilde's name as well as mentioning in passing the "perverse" moralizing of André Gide (*SE* 438–39).<sup>27</sup> The nexus of Eliot's references to narcissistic aestheticism and homosexuality is Wilde, famous for his paradoxical reversals and, especially, for his punishment; Wilde thus serves as a warning to those charmed by sounds and surface appearances.

Eliot's critique of the interlocking errors of linguistic and sexual inversion is closely related to what I have termed perversion in the previous section. Both kinds of erring are energized by homophobia, and both presuppose the common belief that same-sex desire is narcissistic or autoerotic. It is useful to distinguish between them, however, in order to show the diverse ramifications of Eliot's sexual anxieties as well as to explore the particular operations of his understanding of error in its various forms.

Eliot's concern with inversion in the linguistic and moral senses seems to have peaked in 1926–27, at the time of his conversion to Anglicanism. In two essays from this period, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation" and the Clark Lectures, published in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, Eliot



finds that writers to whom he is sympathetic – Seneca and Donne – are guilty of Swinburne's error. However, his criticism of them is mitigated by his acknowledgement of the corruption of their cultures. Unlike the union of "thought and feeling" in Greek drama, "in the plays of Seneca . . . the word has no further reality behind it," and "the centre of value is shifted from what the personage says to the way in which he says it. Very often the value comes near to being mere smartness" (*SE* 68). Although "the ethic of Seneca is a matter of postures," Eliot excuses him, for "many of the faults of Seneca which appear 'decadent' are, after all, merely Roman" (*SE* 72, 70). Donne is given a similar historical justification for his poetic practice, living as he did in an intellectually "chaotic" age. Juxtaposed to Dante's poetry, in which the "interest . . . lies in the idea or the feeling to be conveyed," so that "the image makes this idea or feeling more intelligible," Donne's poetry suffers from an inversion of poetic values. "In Donne, the interest . . . may be in the ingenuity of conveying the idea by that particular image; or the image itself may be more difficult than the idea" (*V* 120). While Dante's images are "serviceable," Donne's are merely "ornamental" (*V* 121). Throughout his career, Eliot consistently praised Dante for respecting the proper hierarchy of literary value, asserting in "To Criticize the Critic" (1961) that "Dante seems to me to teach that the poet should be the servant of his language, rather than the master of it. This sense of responsibility is one of the marks of the *classical* poet" (*CC* 133; emphasis Eliot's). By contrast, "Donne's method is frequently to proceed from the greater to the less, from the central to the peripheral" (*V* 126), privileging the cleverness of his language over the thoughts to which they should refer, going so far as to "violate . . . the order of nature" (*V* 269).

Edgar Allan Poe, a much less sympathetic figure in Eliot's eyes, fell prey to similar tendencies. In "From Poe to Valéry" (1948), Eliot traces the origins of Symbolism in Poe's poetic practice. Citing Poe's use of "immemorial" in "Ulalume," Eliot asserts that "in his choice of the word which has the right *sound*, Poe is by no means careful that it should have also the right *sense*" (*CC* 31; emphasis Eliot's). Although he disclaims any "psychological or pathological explanation," Eliot attributes Poe's "irresponsibility towards the meaning of words" to his immaturity, damning him with the famous phrase that he had "the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty," fascinated like a "pre-adolescent" by cheap mental "delights" (*CC* 32, 35). Poe's reversal of the natural hierarchy of language was to have disastrous consequences for the French poets whom he influenced, including Charles Baudelaire and Paul

Valéry. According to Eliot, with Valéry came “a change of attitude toward the subject matter”; turning upside down the proper order of poetry, Valéry “ceased to believe in *ends* and was only interested in *processes*,” especially in his self-conscious use of language in composition (CC 39–40; emphasis Eliot’s). The ethical, even sexual implications of this inversion of poetic value are evident in Eliot’s wry aside that “*la poésie pure*, that kind of purity came easily to Poe” (CC 40). Grover Smith is quite wide of the mark in his claim that Eliot here “appears in harmony with the poetic philosophy and practice” of Poe’s Symbolist successors.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Poe’s “arrested development” and Valéry’s narcissism hint none too vaguely at certain sexual, especially autoerotic, vices.

A very different perspective on the eroticism of language and on relations between men is evident in Eliot’s essay on *In Memoriam* (1936). He praises Tennyson for having had “the finest ear of any English poet since Milton” (SE 328), yet Tennyson, far from inverting sound and sense, is the exemplar of traditional poetic values. Likewise, Eliot does not interpret his sexually charged friendship with Hallam as an index of literary perversion. Eliot’s examination of the emotional dynamics of Tennyson’s poetry is particularly interesting and unusual in his critical prose. Furthermore, his essay is worthy of attention in light of the reductive approach of many critics to Eliot’s relation to Tennyson. Since Harold Bloom charged that “Eliot’s true and always unnamed precursor was . . . an uneasy composite of Whitman and Tennyson,” it has become routine to cite the latter as an example of Eliot’s alleged deceitfulness regarding his sources.<sup>29</sup> Although Eliot famously commented that Tennyson had “a large dull brain like a farmhouse clock,”<sup>30</sup> his view of Tennyson is more generous and nuanced than is commonly believed. Eliot’s essay on Tennyson is remarkably sensitive to the complexity of love between men prior to its medicalization as homosexuality. Reading *Maud* and *In Memoriam*, Eliot haltingly suggests Tennyson’s emotional or sexual inversion, but he protects Tennyson from the pathological implications of his own analysis. Defending him against the accusation of insipidity, Eliot says,

I do not believe for a moment that Tennyson was a man of mild feelings or weak passions. There is no evidence in his poetry that he knew the experience of violent passion for a woman; but there is plenty of evidence of emotional intensity and violence – but of emotion so deeply suppressed, even from himself, as to tend rather towards the blackest melancholia than towards dramatic action. And it is emotion which . . . attained no ultimate clear purgation. (SE 332)

In *Maud*, Tennyson's "profound and tumultuous" feelings "never arrive at expression" because of what Eliot initially calls "a fundamental error of form" (*SE* 332–33). Yet this formal error turns out to be Tennyson's refusal to take up a sexual position in the poem, either as the masculine subject or as the feminine object. "In *Maud*, Tennyson neither identifies himself with the lover, nor identifies the lover with himself" (*SE* 333). Tennyson's emotional distance in the poem, Eliot implies, stems from his reluctance to assume normatively heterosexual roles.

When Tennyson does arrive at "full expression" in *In Memoriam*, he does so by affirming his love for another man, Arthur Hallam. Allowing that he "get[s] a very different impression from *In Memoriam* from that which Tennyson's contemporaries seem to have got," namely, an affirmation of Christian faith, Eliot frankly admits that he reads the poem as an expression of Tennyson's love for the creature, a love greater than that for the Creator.

Tennyson . . . is naturally, in lamenting his friend, teased by the hope of immortality and reunion beyond death. Yet the renewal craved for seems at best but a continuance, or a substitute for the joys of friendship upon earth . . . His concern is for the loss of man rather than for the gain of God. (*SE* 334)

Far from criticizing Tennyson for inverting spiritual, not to mention sexual, values, Eliot urges his reader to look "innocently at the surface" of *In Memoriam* and thus "to come to the depths, to the abyss of sorrow" (*SE* 337). This surface which calls for a credulous, sympathetic attitude on the part of its reader cannot be Tennyson's theology, which Eliot describes as conventional, but is probably what Eliot wanted to think of as Tennyson's "innocent" love for Hallam.

Eliot's tender treatment of *In Memoriam*'s erotic theme, which even in Tennyson's day was seen as troubling,<sup>31</sup> gains strength in light of his sardonic comments about Tennyson's overtly heterosexual poems, such as "The Two Voices," concerning "the perpetuation of love by offspring" (*SE* 287). Eliot's cynicism toward the "Tennysonian happy marriage, . . . which is one sort of bankruptcy" (*V* 114), is directed against the epithalamium that serves as the epilogue to *In Memoriam*, written to commemorate the marriage of Tennyson's sister Cecilia and Edmund Lushington.<sup>32</sup> Although he is critical of Tennyson's celebrations of heterosexual love, Eliot calls his text of errant, inverted passion "great poetry," with "honest," albeit despairing, feelings.<sup>33</sup>

Eliot's biting criticism of the inversion of literary, moral, and, by

implication, sexual norms in Swinburne, Pater, Donne, and Poe – in sharp contrast to his compassionate attitude toward Tennyson's poem of male friendship – situates him equivocally on what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the male “homosocial continuum,” that is, the spectrum of bonds between men that, for at least the past two centuries in Anglo-American culture, has been structured and fractured by homophobia.<sup>34</sup> In one sense, Eliot is an exemplary case of “male homosexual panic,” Sedgwick's term for the horrified response of heterosexually identified men to the fact that many cherished and intense kinds of male friendship and affiliation are “not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds.”<sup>35</sup> Far from an aberration, such panic is the “normal condition” of properly socialized men. Eliot's abjection of writers such as Pater as well as his disavowal of their influence on him thus served to virilize and normalize Eliot in the face of the potentially contaminating effects of his male affiliations. Gregory Jay suggests that Eliot's confessed “aversion” to Walt Whitman and his suppression of Whitman's influence, both on his own work and on contemporary poetry in general, is homophobically motivated.<sup>36</sup> However, Eliot's reading of *In Memoriam* calls for a more nuanced analysis of the tension in his work between, in Sedgwick's words, “the *prescription* of the most intimate male bonding and the *proscription* of (the remarkably cognate) ‘homosexuality.’”<sup>37</sup> Writing at a crucial historical moment in the definition of homosexuality and heterosexuality, Eliot often veered into a frightened, violent denial of homosexuality, but he also embraced what he saw as non-pathological forms of male love.

In view of Eliot's antipathy toward sexual inversion, it is surprising to find that in his critical prose he frequently describes in fervent tones a kind of youthful literary passion, what he calls the young poet's “daemoniac possession” by an older male poet (*UPUC* 26). The juvenile poet's inclination is homosocial, even homoerotic, yet it is for Eliot the powerful engine of inspiration. The zeal to write originates in a yearning toward imitative identification with the elder poet, and, even, in the desire for possessive appropriation, to take hold of and overcome him. The forces from which poetry springs, according to Eliot, are thus intimately related to the sexual inversion that he condemns.

The only passion sanctioned – indeed, highly praised – by Eliot is this special sort of homoerotic ardor by a budding poet for an older, usually dead poet whom he esteems. Eliot's early essays describe a boy who develops a “passionate admiration for some one writer.”<sup>38</sup> Such a “love”

is "the first step in [his] education," even if the object of his adolescent infatuation is later discarded. Eliot compares the professional maturation undergone by the ephebe through his relation to the senior poet with the personal transformation undergone by a young lover in his first amorous affair. "There is a close analogy between the sort of experience which develops a man and the sort of experience that develops a writer," Eliot writes in "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry" (1919), for "similar types of experience form the nourishment of both."<sup>39</sup> This emotional experience is

a feeling of profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy, with another, probably a dead author. It may overcome us suddenly, on a first or after a long acquaintance; it is certainly a crisis; and when a young writer is seized with his first passion of this sort he may be changed, metamorphosed almost, within a few weeks even . . . The imperative intimacy arouses for the first time a real, an unshakable confidence. That you possess this secret knowledge, this intimacy, with the dead man, . . . who can penetrate at once the thick and dusty circumlocutions about his reputation, can call yourself alone his friend; it is something more than *encouragement* to you. It is a cause of development, like personal relations in life. Like personal intimacies in life, it may and probably will pass, but it will be ineffaceable . . . We may not be great lovers; but if we had a genuine affair with a real poet of any degree we have acquired a monitor to avert us when we are not in love. (39; emphasis Eliot's)

The frankness of Eliot's description of the "crisis" of the young lover-poet, "seized" by his "imperative intimacy" with the "dead man" about whom he has "secret knowledge" – indeed, whose reputation he can "penetrate" so as to "possess" him as his own special "friend" – more than suggests the homoeroticism, and perhaps even the necrophilism, that binds the younger poet with his dead poetic beloved.

In contrast to Harold Bloom's notion of the ephebe's struggle to come into his own by killing off his paternal precursors, Eliot envisions his relation to his immediate source of inspiration as a positive, even amorous filiation. Henry James's relationship to Hawthorne is an exemplary instance of the "personal kinship" between a younger and older writer similar to Hellenic male relations between ephebe and teacher.<sup>40</sup> Eliot doubts "the genuineness of the love of poetry of any reader who did not have one or more of these personal affections for the work of some poet of no great historical importance" (*OPP* 37). Indeed, it is a poet about whom Eliot admits that he has written nothing at all who seems to have had the greatest impact upon him as a young writer. Late in his career, Eliot acknowledged that it was from Jules Laforgue and the minor

Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists that "I, in my poetic formation, had learned my lessons; it was by them . . . that my imagination had been stimulated," having "read them with passionate delight" during a "period in which the stirrings of desire to write verse were becoming insistent" (*CC* 18). Eliot's descriptions of his adolescent reading pleasures, like Proust's, are tinged with autoeroticism, recalling the association, drawn by Freud and incessantly reiterated in psychoanalytic and popular literature, between narcissism and homosexuality.<sup>41</sup> His enraptured accounts of his early reading experiences suggest that these formative pleasures, like those of his own "Saint Narcissus," who "wished he had been a young girl / Caught in the woods by a drunken old man" and whose "flesh was in love with the penetrant arrows" (*F* 93), were charged with homoerotic desire.

The crucial issue for our purposes is not to come to an accurate reckoning of the influences upon Eliot nor to identify his first poetic love but to understand the nature of such a literary love and Eliot's conception of it in terms of his hostility to perverse emotions and to homosexuality in general. For Eliot's harsh criticism of interest in the personality of the poet and his denunciation of the reader's or poet's indulgence in personal feelings contrast sharply to his ardent recollection of his possession of and by the beloved poets of his youth. In "Religion and Literature" (1935), he urges sympathetically that

everyone, I believe, who is at all sensible to the seductions of poetry, can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of one poet . . . What happens is a kind of inundation, of invasion of the undeveloped personality by the stronger personality of the poet. (*SE* 394)

Eliot thus fondly recalls the literary seductions of his youth, but in this essay his memory serves an argument for the protection of youthful readers from the pernicious effects of seduction by the wrong sort of poet.

What seems to happen in Eliot's essays is a shift from the youthful poet's active desire for the older poet, whose secrets he penetrates through his devoted enthusiasm, to a passive sense of the youthful poet's dangerous enchantment or ravishment by the older poet. The tables have begun to turn by the 1929 "Dante" essay, where Eliot writes that "the experience of a poem is . . . very much like our intenser experience of other human beings. There is a first, or an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror . . .; a moment which can never be forgotten, but which is never repeated integrally" (*SE* 250).

Such a terrifying moment of surrender – Eliot’s famous “bewildering minute” that he liked to quote from Cyril Tourneur’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* – implies a desire all the more exciting and frightening for its perverse eroticism. In a 1935 letter to Stephen Spender that echoes his published remarks, Eliot says that “You don’t really criticize any author to whom you have never surrendered yourself. . . . Even just the bewildering minute counts; you have to give yourself up” (*SP* 13). Giving himself up to another male poet was a perilous risk for Eliot, although as he became canonized himself he could look back on his adolescence and view with judicious distance a period when

the poem, or the poetry of a single poet, invades the youthful consciousness and assumes complete possession for a time . . . Much as in our youthful experiences of love, we do not so much see the person as infer the existence of some outside object which sets in motion these new and delightful feelings in which we are absorbed . . . It is not deliberate choice of a poet to mimic, but writing under a kind of daemonic possession by one poet. (*UPUC* 25–26)

Eliot’s enigmatic reference to the poet’s “daemonic possession” has raised questions concerning the nature of what Eliot elsewhere calls the poet’s “unknown, dark *psychic material* – we might say, the octopus or angel with which the poet struggles” (*OPP* 110; emphasis Eliot’s).

Rather than speculate on some dim secret harbored by Eliot, we may read his accounts of his adolescent literary passions in terms of the structure of male relations in his critical work. Inversions of the proper order of language and literature – including the privileging of sound over sense, of image over idea, of signs over their referents, and of poetic processes over their ends – issue from a moral waywardness that in turn produces, in Eliot’s view, the inversion of the proper order of nature, that is, unnatural sexuality. Although Eliot never explicitly mentions homosexuality or sodomy in his published essays, unlike his letters,<sup>42</sup> his reprobation of literary inversions is energized by his phobic rejection of male same-sex desire. The fact that this disavowal coexists side-by-side with his enthusiastic affirmation of the infatuations that stimulated him as a young poet attests to the dangerous potency that the unnamed desire possessed for Eliot, a desire that draws its strength from its disavowal. Eliot’s critical writings bear witness both to the violent split between male friendship and sexual passion as well as to their subterranean confluence. In short, the deviant desire that Eliot denies is also the force that animates his writing. Similarly, Eliot censures violations of the boundaries that determine the order of literature and criticizes practices

that relativize literary value and adulterate the social order, yet in these cases, as with perversion and inversion, such errors are constitutive of the very order that they transgress.

#### IMPURE MINGLING

At the conclusion of his 1921 essay on John Dryden, Eliot throws up his hands and asks, "What is man to decide what poetry is?" (*SE* 315). Far from a rhetorical question, the decision regarding what poetry is and what it is not – or should not be – is a major dilemma in Eliot's critical writings. The problem first presented itself to him as a matter of maintaining the purity of poetry and criticism. Hence, in *The Sacred Wood*, he enjoined the "pure contemplation of poetry from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed" (*SW* 14–15) and censured the "impure" mixture of philosophy and poetry (*SW* 160–61). Although he later modified his views and claimed that "pure literature is a chimera . . . ; admit the vestige of an idea and it is already transformed,"<sup>43</sup> drawing the line between poetry and nonpoetry was a persistent concern throughout his career.

As a consequence, Eliot often thought of literary error as a matter of impure mingling. Such impurity arises on the formal level, in the mixture of literary genres and the confusion of the conventions proper to specific genres; on the epistemological level, in the confusion between thought and feeling; and on the discursive level, in the confusion of poetry with theology, philosophy, psychology, or sociology. In each case, Eliot sought an ideal of homogeneity, just as in *After Strange Gods* he wished for a society with a racially "homogeneous" population free of "adulterate" elements (20). Impure mingling on these levels is closely related to what Eliot believed was the perverse turning away from the object of poetry for the sake of "impure desires" inasmuch as such diversions introduce external interests into what should be an immaculately disinterested realm. While many of Eliot's specific complaints against discursive interminglings appear motivated by his wish to protect his own poetry from damaging psychobiographical interpretations, the larger aim of his arguments against formal, epistemological, and discursive impurities is to demarcate a self-justifying field of literary value uncontaminated by "swarms of inarticulate feelings" and free from profane interests, beliefs or desires, except insofar as the latter were themselves, in Eliot's eyes, likewise "pure." In short, literary and sexual, social, political and religious purity are mutually reinforcing concepts, underwritten by a rhetoric of chastity.



Eliot's attempts to define the proper field of poetry are an exercise in circumscription. Literary purity calls for clear boundaries; the error of impure mingling is hence a boundary violation. Like dirt, defined by anthropologists as "matter out of place," error is a contravention of ordered relations. According to Mary Douglas, "where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter," and so "ideas about separating, purifying, [and] demarcating . . . transgressions" expose the structural relations among apparently discrete cultural prohibitions.<sup>44</sup> In a similar fashion, Eliot's criticism of literary impurities is consistent with his injunctions concerning social and sexual values. Just as his disapproval of the inversion of linguistic and literary norms depends upon his rejection of the homoerotic desires that unwittingly energize his poetry, so Eliot's critique of literary impurity ends up admitting – this time openly but in a highly qualified way – that such impurities are a necessary, interior condition of poetry.

Eliot's insistence upon establishing boundaries for poetry follows from his cartographic sense of literary history. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), Eliot describes the field of literature as a "landscape" drawn in perspective. "Armed with a powerful glass," the critic "will be able to sweep the distance and gain an acquaintance with minute objects in the landscape . . . ; he will be able to gauge nicely the position and proportion of the objects surrounding us, in the whole of the vast panorama" (*UPUC* 100–101). In a word, the body of Western literature for Eliot is a map; similarly, in *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* (1948), whose epigraph is a definition of "definition" as "the setting of bounds: limitation" (*OED*), culture is figured typographically. In the latter text, Eliot recommends that "the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born" (52), just as in the former he tries to settle the proper place of literary works. The stress that Eliot lays upon the literally geographic stability of culture in *Notes*, along with his wish for an ethnically and religiously unmixed society without "free-thinking," mobile Jews (*ASG* 20), is thoroughly in keeping with his critical sanctions against promiscuous literary minglings.

The anti-Semitic, neoagrarian values expressed in Eliot's social writings and poetry have justly come under attack, most recently and vigorously by Anthony Julius, who persuasively argues that "anti-Semitism did not disfigure Eliot's work, it animated it."<sup>45</sup> Julius specifies in painstaking detail Eliot's "exploitation" of anti-Semitic conventions, both in his early poetry (notably "Gerontion" and "Burbank") and in his social

commentary, insisting that Eliot's racist beliefs cannot be cordoned off from his artistic creations. Against the grain of the New Critical doctrine that defined Eliot's poetic oeuvre, Julius's claim that the poet's "anti-Semitic discourse is an inseparable part of his greater literary undertaking" (29) would, paradoxically, find a sympathetic audience in Eliot himself, who argued that "I cannot see that poetry can ever be separated from . . . belief."<sup>46</sup> Eliot's assessment of impure mingling as an intractable error draws our attention to the tangled, "tentacular roots" of his own thought, lost to sight in Eliot's elevation to the role of "the bishop of modern poetry" in the 1950s.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, as we see in the following chapter, Eliot's early poetry is not, as some critics would have it, a radical exception in an otherwise conservative oeuvre, for the "ambivalence" that Jay finds in the early poetry "between a nostalgia for origins and a drive for revolutionary fragmentation" is present throughout Eliot's literary criticism.<sup>48</sup>

Within the literary field, Eliot sought to demarcate the proper borderlines among literary forms. Early on, he argued for the "inner necessity" of the difference between prose and poetry, and claimed that blurring the distinction in the prose poem is an evasion of the technical demands of each medium.<sup>49</sup> In subsequent essays, he judges Renaissance playwrights according to their conformity to generic requirements, including the exigencies of versification. Eliot everywhere stresses the need to accept the restrictions of art and criticizes Elizabethan dramatists for violating their own rules. In "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" (1924), for instance, he claims that it was "strictly an error" by Shakespeare to introduce into the same play, *Macbeth*, different kinds of ghosts (*SE* 116).

More broadly, error arises from sacrificing aesthetic requirements for the sake of realism. "The weakness of Elizabethan drama," according to Eliot, is "its attempt at realism" and its "lack of conventions" (*SE* 112). He continually attacks sociological and psychological realism; at its best, art aims for universal truths, not particular representations or emotional stimulation. Harnessing art to social or emotive ends is an "impurity" that, in the case of the Elizabethans, sprang from their "unwillingness to accept any limitation" (*SE* 116). So Eliot's task as a critic was not only to reform current critical practices, censuring critics such as Havelock Ellis who would psychologize literature (*SE* 202), but also to correct the Elizabethans themselves, ordering the canon of Elizabethan drama according to what he believed was its internal aesthetic logic, a logic that dramatists of the period nonetheless often disobeyed. Moreover, the

formal impurities of Elizabethan drama suggest its sexual licentiousness and unbridled passion.

Eliot's essays of the 1920s are to a large degree concerned with the relation between cognition and sensibility.<sup>50</sup> For instance, he inveighs against the impure mingling of thought and feeling in the work of William Blake, who suffered from a "confusion of thought, emotion, and vision" (*SE* 322). By contrast, it is a mistake to fault Ben Jonson for failing to plumb the abyss of the human psyche. In his intellectually complex plays, "unconscious does not respond to unconscious; no swarms of inarticulate feelings are aroused" (*SE* 148). Eliot allows that the works of his contemporaries "have a depth" that Jonson's lacks, but such profundity is dangerous, for "their words have often a network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires" (*SE* 155). Eliot's allusion to the "obscure" emotions explored by Elizabethan writers hints vaguely at unspeakable desires. "Elizabethan morality . . . did not suppress; its dark corners are haunted by the ghost of Mary Fitton and perhaps greater. It is a subject which has not been sufficiently investigated" (*SE* 214). But Eliot does not peer into those dark corners inhabited by Mary Fitton, the "dark lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets, nor does he pry into the even murkier topic of the bard's scandalous love for the "fair youth." Far from specifying the powerful desires unleashed by Elizabethan drama, Eliot prefers to idealize their "very high development of the senses," claiming that their sensuality was fused with language into an aesthetic union that is now lost to us. "With the end of Chapman, Middleton, Webster, Tournear, [and] Donne, we end a period when the intellect was immediately at the tips of the senses. Sensation became word and word was sensation" (*SE* 209–10). His praise of the Elizabethans' sensuality echoes the incarnation of the Word made Flesh, rendering their prelapsarian, carnal sensibility sacred and impossibly distant, as though the Elizabethan period embodied an imaginary ideal which we moderns can never achieve.

A corollary of the epistemological error of confusing thought and feeling is a distinction Eliot repeatedly draws in his later essays between the intellectual explanation of a poem and an intuitive understanding of it. "The chief use of the 'meaning' of a poem," he asserts, "may be . . . to keep [the reader's] mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog"; however, "the more seasoned reader, he who has reached, in these matters, a state of greater *purity*, does not bother about understanding" (*UPUC* 144; emphasis Eliot's).

Here, Eliot's notion of "understanding" refers to the reduction of a poem to its paraphrasable, rational content or to its sources. Eliot is thus thrown back into the previously despised camp of "art-for-art's-sake," which, he says, "contained this true impulse behind it," that it recognized "the error of the poet's trying to do" the work of the prose writer (*UPUC* 145). Hence, while in his earlier essays Eliot had argued for the cognitive value of poetry, prizing "thought" over "emotion" and derogating poetry and poets who indulge their own or their readers' emotions, in his subsequent essays he resorts to a more or less antirationalist theory of poetry. Yet in both cases he claims to be defending the "purity" of poetry.

The rhetorical structure of Eliot's critical project of distinguishing truth from error depends upon the distinction between a pure interior and an impure exterior, a division guarded by critics. But because they are apt to wander, Eliot warns critics against trespassing this limit by introducing nonpoetic discourses: "[T]here is a philosophic borderline, which you must not transgress too far or too often, if you . . . are not prepared to present yourself as a philosopher, metaphysician, sociologist, or psychologist instead" (*UPUC* 56–57). In this passage – a typical and straightforward example of Eliot's rhetorical practice of drawing a distinction that relies for its efficacy upon the terms it thereby differentiates – Eliot also separates two, opposing critical tendencies, claiming that correct criticism lies in the middle. Yet the indeterminacy of this critical mean demonstrates the difficulty that Eliot faced in delimiting exclusive boundaries.

Criticism of poetry moves between two extremes. On the one hand the critic may busy himself so much with the implications of a poem . . . – implications moral, social, religious, or other – that the poetry becomes hardly more than a text for a discourse . . . Or if you stick too closely to the "poetry" . . . you will tend to evacuate it of all significance. (*UPUC* 56)

Confronted with the problem of specifying the proper place for criticism, Eliot concludes by citing that exemplar of "critical integrity," Samuel Johnson. "Within his limitations, he is one of the great critics; and he is a great critic because he keeps within his limitations. When you know what they are, you know where you are" (*UPUC* 57). Eliot's openly tautological praise of Johnson is tantamount to an admission that the guardians of literature must be those who are within the fold, who never need to question where they are because they are already there.

The third type of "impure mingling" that was for Eliot the most

troubling dilemma in defining the proper boundaries of poetry is what he called the confusion between poetry and belief. This problem understandably became acute about the time of his religious conversion. In "The Idea of a Literary Review" (1926), Eliot faces "the impossibility of defining the frontiers, or limiting the context of 'literature.' Even the *purest* literature is alimmented from non-literary sources, and has non-literary consequences."<sup>51</sup> In his subsequent writings Eliot repeatedly addresses the problem of the infiltration of strictly non-poetic beliefs into the poetic realm. For Eliot, this meant the acceptance of error – the impure mingling of discursive fields – in the service of a higher truth, namely, his Christian belief. However, he continued to assert the purity of poetry against the intrusion of all other discourses.

Eliot's most sustained discussion of the conflict between poetry and religious belief is his 1929 "Dante" essay. "The question of what Dante 'believed'" is one that the reader "cannot afford to *ignore*," although he insists that "there is a difference . . . between philosophical *belief* and poetic *assent*" (SE 257; emphasis Eliot's). He maintains that confusing poetry qua poetry and poetry as the literal statement of a philosophic or religious position is "impure" and that, as a reader, "you are not called upon to believe what Dante believed, . . . but you are called upon . . . to understand it" (SE 258). At this stage, Eliot continues to make a distinction between "what Dante believes as a poet and what he believes as a man" and to argue that poetry calls for a "suspension of belief" (SE 258–59). However, he confesses that he "cannot, in practice, wholly separate [his] poetic appreciation from [his] personal beliefs," indeed, "that 'literary appreciation' is an abstraction, and pure poetry a phantom, and that both in creation and enjoyment much always enters which is . . . irrelevant" (SE 271).

Eliot's admission of the necessarily impure nature of literary judgment becomes a recurrent motif in his subsequent criticism. However, his acceptance of "irrelevant," contingent factors in literary appreciation is highly circumscribed. "Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint," Eliot maintains in "Religion and Literature" (1935), for "the 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards" (SE 388). The separation of "our literary from our religious judgements . . . is not, and never can be, complete" (SE 392). A full assessment, he implies, is one that includes a religious, especially Christian, point of view. Christianity, or at least Eliot's version thereof, is a necessary supplement to the

criticism of poetry, an essential irrelevancy or intrinsic externality that is vital to its integrity.

In his late essay, "To Criticize the Critic" (1961), Eliot again admits that "it is impossible to fence off *literary* criticism from criticism on other grounds, and that moral, religious and social judgments cannot be wholly excluded" (CC 25; emphasis Eliot's). Yet he maintains the standard of an *almost* pure literary judgment, impugns the ethics of aesthetics, and claims the relative purity of poet-critics such as himself. "That . . . literary merit can be estimated in complete isolation is the illusion of those who believe that literary merit alone can justify the publication of a book which could otherwise be condemned on moral grounds," Eliot claims, going on to assert that, "in so far as literary criticism is purely literary, I believe that the criticism of artists writing about their own art . . . carries more authority" (CC 25–26). Recouping the ground he has just conceded, Eliot reminds the reader that he has "directed [his] attention on [his] literary criticism *qua* literary," and has not introduced his "religious, social, political, or moral beliefs" (CC 26).

Unlike the perverse deviations and inverted desires that appear more or less unwittingly within his essays, the mingling of religious and literary criteria of judgment is a prominent theme in Eliot's later writings. Despite the qualifications with which he hedges about his admission of religious belief as an essential, adulterate factor or a necessary error in literary criticism, Eliot's justification for such a concession is grounds for the inclusion of other impure criteria that he placed beyond the pale. These impurities include philosophical, sociological, and psychological criticism, as well as those so errant in his eyes as to be beneath overt condemnation, such as criticism based upon the analysis of homosexual desire. Although a homosexual interpretation of literary texts was too low for Eliot's explicit condemnation in his published prose, it was not below his notice or his public censure. His successful threat of legal action in 1952 to suppress John Peter's remarkable reading of same-sex desire in *The Waste Land* – a reading in which the word "homosexual" does not appear – makes abundantly clear that norms of sexual purity are at stake in Eliot's injunctions against the supposed contamination of the poetic realm.<sup>52</sup>

Perversely, Eliot's admission of the necessity for strictly nonaesthetic, religious standards of judgment opens the door for their opposite, that is, for literary judgments based upon the critique of the religious values in which he believed. Having admitted this contingency, Eliot cannot get the wayward cat back into the bag. The return of the impurities that

Eliot wishes to cast out of literary discourse, as a kind of required supplement to what should be an integral whole, parallels the return of relativizing forces within what he saw as the true project of literary criticism: to conserve and confirm the absolute nature of literary value.

## DISSEMINATION

“[T]he struggle of our time [is] to concentrate, not to dissipate,” Eliot enjoins in *After Strange Gods* (53). By “concentration” Eliot means the conservation of what he calls “our tradition.” Hence, to concentrate is “to renew our association with traditional wisdom; [and] to re-establish a vital connexion between the individual and the race” (53). The forces of modernity, by contrast, have dissipated traditional Western values. In literary terms, this has meant “giv[ing] rein to [the writer’s] ‘individuality’” (35), making each man his own moral authority, thus leading to the decay of or, as in the case of D. H. Lawrence, the utter “absence of any moral or social sense” at all (39).

Eliot chose not to reissue *After Strange Gods* and, according to Christopher Ricks, may have regretted the racism of the vision he drew therein of a “homogeneous” society unified by shared customs, a common religious faith, and “the blood kinship of ‘the same people living in the same place’” (18), for which the presence of “any large number of free-thinking Jews [is] undesirable” (20).<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, *After Strange Gods* makes explicit the opposition in Eliot’s work between what he saw as the forces of conservation and dispersal, or between concentration and dissipation. This opposition shapes the rhetoric of much of Eliot’s critical prose throughout his career and determines error as dissemination in several senses, ranging from the dispersion of the Western literary-cultural tradition to moral dissipation to the fragmentation of a writer’s oeuvre or of an individual text. These criteria of error participate in the logic of errancy as aberrant movement or wandering and are linked to the systematic opposition in Eliot’s critical prose between figures for stasis versus flux. In short, error as dissemination in Eliot’s criticism presumes a spermatic economy threatened by the dispersion of phallic authority.

Eliot typically uses the terms “dispersion” and “dissipation” to describe the movement away from an authoritative center. For instance, he calls heresy a “centrifugal impulse,” leading to Julius’s observation that “the tension between the centripetal and the centrifugal is critical to Eliot’s work.”<sup>54</sup> However, I have chosen dissemination – a word that

rarely occurs in his writings – as an overarching figure to designate the diffusion of literary unity on the levels of the text, the oeuvre, and literature as a whole as well as the relativization of moral and literary values. All of these ways of erring underscore the sexual implications of Eliot's demand for the conservation of social and literary energies, as well as his wish, more broadly, to contain the errant effects of writing – what he once termed “the natural sin of language.”<sup>55</sup>

In his earliest literary criticism Eliot praises unity, both the formal unity of a particular work and the collective unity of a writer's oeuvre. Hence, according to Eliot in his 1919 essay on Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's “vices of style” are worse than Marlowe's because the former's consist of “a tortured perverse ingenuity of images which dissipates instead of concentrating the imagination” (*SE* 119). Elsewhere, however, Eliot argues that the body of Shakespeare's work is unified by his personality; “the whole of Shakespeare's work is *one* poem,” and everything he wrote is “unified by one significant, consistent, and developing personality” (*SE* 203; emphasis Eliot's). Eliot is not interested in an individual author's psychological constitution but rather in the role that the author, considered as a structural abstraction, plays in anchoring the text to a coherent set of intentions. Shakespeare is simply an authorizing signature, a term for what Michel Foucault has called the “author function” in the works under his name, a designation for the mind that is presumed to have formed the text and to whom the meanings discovered therein can be attributed.<sup>56</sup> Those whom Eliot ranks at the bottom of the hierarchy of Elizabethan dramatists fail because they lack a consistent vision of life that organizes and animates their oeuvres. Eliot's criticism of John Ford and Philip Massinger is aimed at the lack of a cogent design and, by implication, the lack of the sense of a designer standing behind and authorizing their work as a whole.

On a larger scale, dissemination can infect an entire literary period or genre. Considered as a whole, the body of Elizabethan drama, according to Eliot, tended toward dissipation because of “its lack of conventions.” In “Four Elizabethan Dramatists” (1924), Eliot criticizes the “general attitude toward life of the Elizabethans [as] one of anarchism, of dissolution, of decay,” a moral errancy in keeping with “their artistic greediness, their desire for every sort of effect together, their unwillingness to accept any limitation and abide by it” (*SE* 116). The Elizabethans' rejection of formal boundaries for their plays had lasting, pernicious effects on English drama, especially its degeneration into realism.



The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been that its aim of realism was unlimited . . . [S]ince Kyd . . . there has been no form to arrest . . . the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind. (*SE* 111)

In short, Eliot argues that the failure to observe formal aesthetic rules has led to the expense of English drama in a waste of shame, that is, in vulgar realism. Unrestrained by external authority, the English dramatist “expands” and spends his “flow,” thus ending up in the sterile “desert” of modern drama. The degradation of realist drama is in part the result of what Eliot called, in “The Function of Criticism,” “listening to the inner voice,” the common possessors of which “ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea” (*SE* 27).

In modern times, perhaps the greatest threat to literature, in Eliot’s view, is the relativizing effect of the proliferation of discourses, which erodes belief in the inherent value of literature. Concomitantly, the rise of national or provincial literatures undermines what Eliot saw as the universality of great literature, dispersing the literary field into multiple, heterogeneous, local entities. In his essays from the 1940s and 1950s, collected in *On Poetry and Poets*, Eliot is increasingly preoccupied with the relation between literary discourse and society, particularly within a Western world whose cultural, racial, and epistemological fragmentation deprives poetry of its supposed former capacity for general significance. The modern lack of homogeneity dissipates literary criticism into ancillary pursuits, such as source-hunting or psychobiography, and condemns modern poets to a narrow, limited role.

In his critique of the dissemination of literary value, Eliot’s rhetoric relies upon a series of oppositions between the universal and the local, between center and periphery, stasis and flux, solidity and errant wandering, inside and outside, and so forth, all of which are aimed at circumscribing the realm of absolute literary value, free from empirical or historical contingencies. Yet the former is purchased at the price of positing the truly great, unquestionably “classic” text as an inert, transcendental ideal, while the latter takes on a perverse sort of vigor and fecundity, effectively displacing the center from which Eliot tries to exclude it. Like the “true world” in Nietzsche’s “History of an Error,” Eliot’s “true literature” fades into an unattainable, unknowable idea that, even within his own defense of it, loses its power to console or obligate.<sup>57</sup> Eliot’s later essays thus assume an elegiac tone, mourning the death of true literature, yet such a literature exists only as a retrospective

construction; it lives, so to speak, as a corpse. Hence, Eliot's attempts to define such a literature become involved in regresses, retreating ever farther back into the remote origins of Western literature in search of a stable ideal, and become entangled in the double bind of, on the one hand, the need to specify what true literature is and, on the other hand, the absolute unspecifiability of universally great literature. For every argument that justifies a text as true literature also returns it to the realm of particular, contingent, and disseminating values.

In "The Social Function of Poetry" (1945), Eliot argues that, despite the particular purposes of certain poetic genres, the function of poetry in general is its "value for the people" as a whole. This public aim underlies Eliot's distinction between the "eccentric or mad" poet who "may have feelings that are unique but which cannot be shared" and the "genuine poet" who "discovers new variations of sensibility which can be appropriated by others" (*OPP* 9). The former's perverse preoccupation with his private interests prevents him from serving his greater obligation to the poetic tradition.

A fascinating text for an analysis of textual dissemination is "What Is a Classic?" an essay that, like *After Strange Gods*, affirms cultural homogeneity as the necessary foundation for the classic poet and defends the value of the classic text as a transcendent standard of taste opposing the centrifugal forces of modernity. Yet, apparently against himself, Eliot also argues that the absence of a classic in English is "fortunate" for English poets because the literary possibilities of the language have not been "exhausted" by it. Like humanity's fortunate fall from Edenic grace, the imperfection of English literature leaves open a "future" for the literary potential of the language, and the English poet's lack of a classic predecessor gives him room to exercise his lesser talents. The premises of "What Is a Classic?" comprise Eliot's socioliterary creed: the classic text issues from a "mature society" with a "mature language," whose poets have achieved a "common style" and share with their readers a "community of taste" (*OPP* 56–57). English literature as a whole falls short of such criteria, and even the Elizabethan period was not classic, in Eliot's view, because of its "immaturity," by which he means its lack of "order and stability, of equilibrium and harmony"; instead, it manifested "extremes of individual style" (*OPP* 57). In short, the nonclassic age is given to perverse eccentricities, impure stylistic minglings, and a general dissipation of its poetic energies.

While Eliot praises Dante in passing as "the European classic," his aim in this essay is to establish Virgil as the classic poet, not just as an

exemplar of classicism, but as the *only* classic, indeed, as a transcendental ideal of “the classic.” Although he lists Virgil’s qualifications as the classic poet, including his “maturity of mind,” his historical consciousness, and his “finer sense of proportion” (*OPP* 62), and although he grounds Virgil’s status in the “classic age” from which he sprang, Eliot’s elevation of him is based neither on Virgil’s individual qualities as a poet nor on the literary properties of the *Aeneid*, but rather on the supposed necessity for an ideal norm or, in Eliot’s idiom, for “the classic.” The star to guide our modern wandering bark, “Virgil” is a proper name for what Kant called a “regulative principle.”<sup>58</sup> In Eliot’s words, “the value of Virgil to us . . . is in providing us with a criterion” (*OPP* 71). At bottom, it does not matter much to Eliot what Virgil did right that every other poet has, in one way or another, done wrong, but that Virgil stands as a marker of absolute and unquestionable literary value. Indeed, his value is precisely that he serves as the sign of *pure* value, not as an instance of any *particular* literary values. Moreover, the presumed fact that successive poets have fallen short of Virgil’s mark and that modern languages are incapable of achieving the classic recursively and tautologically confirms Eliot’s belief in the transcendental nature of that ideal. “No modern language can hope to produce a classic,” Eliot asserts, and the failure of other poets’ aspirations confirms his faith that “our classic, the classic of all Europe, is Virgil” (*OPP* 73).

The unapologetic Eurocentrism of Eliot’s claims and his unabashed use of the first person plural, assuming that “we” Europeans share his tastes as well as his perceived need for a classic ideal and, further, that “we” thereby tacitly accept his authority, may be so offensive to late twentieth-century readers that the self-subverting aspect of his argument goes unnoticed. Much of Virgil’s virtue, for Eliot, lies in his remoteness from English literature. Such distance not only places Virgil beyond comparison with modern poets but also protects the latter from being destroyed by him, as were Virgil’s successors. Indeed, Eliot argues, Virgil had a fatal influence on subsequent Latin writers. “Every great work of poetry tends to make impossible the production of equally great works of the same kind,” and Virgil, as a “great classic poet, . . . exhaust[ed] not a form only, but the language of his time” (*OPP* 66). In a word, Virgil killed off the literary potential of Latin, leaving it, as it were, dead before its time. Yet the death of the Latin language is precisely what enables it to serve as the vehicle for Virgil as the twentieth-century European literary ideal. The classic standard must come from the dead, from the tomb. To approach the classic, according to Eliot, “it

is necessary to go to the two dead languages [Latin and Greek]: it is important that they are dead, because through their death we have come into our inheritance" (*OPP* 70). Furthermore, the deadness of Latin is linked to its other strengths – its homogeneity and prized "common style" – whereas English "tends to variety rather than perfection," and "offers wide scope for legitimate divergencies of style" (*OPP* 68–69). As a heterogeneous, living language, English is condemned to errancy; it cannot achieve Latin's "universality" and "comprehensiveness" (*OPP* 69). The death of Latin both ensures Virgil's canonization as "the standard of the classic" and permits the vagrant freedom of English. "We may be glad that [English] has never completely realized itself in the work of one classic poet; but . . . the classic criterion is of vital importance to us" – important in so far as it is an unrealizable ideal by which "to judge our individual poets" (*OPP* 67). In a word, the demise of Latin enshrines it as the eternal ground of literary value and opens the space of error for English poets, at once authorizing their work as derivative and licensing their failures as an inevitable necessity.

Strictly speaking, Eliot's argument for Virgil as the normative poetic ideal is circular: Virgil is our classic because he is dead, and because he is dead, he is our classic. Or, to put it another way, Virgil is the standard of literary value because he is inherently valuable and, because his value is beyond question, he is the sign or mark of intrinsic literary value. In short, Virgil needs no defense because he *is* the defense of the indisputable value of poetry. "Virgil" is thus, for Eliot, not simply the name of a particular poet but the *citation* of absolute literary value.

Far from being simply a flaw in Eliot's argument, his tautological affirmation of Virgil is its very foundation. Such question-begging, according to Nietzsche, is indispensable to the belief in any absolute truth, for

it is only by means of forgetfulness that man can ever reach the point of fancying himself to possess a "truth" . . . If he will not be satisfied with truth in the form of tautology, that is to say, if he will not be content with empty husks, then he will always exchange truths for illusions.<sup>59</sup>

Eliot's willingness to accept the illusion of Virgil's absolute value thus permits him, according to Nietzsche's logic, to escape the unpleasant prospect of exchanging that "truth" for the recognition that it is only an illusion. Eliot's error is thus quite useful, for, again in Nietzsche's words, "there can be neither society nor culture without untruth . . . Everything which is good and beautiful depends upon illusion: truth kills – it even

kills itself (insofar as it realizes that error is its foundation)."<sup>60</sup> Yet Eliot's question begging, however enabling it may be for his belief in absolute literary value under the sign of Virgil, nonetheless has a disseminating effect insofar as it raises the unintended implication that Virgil may be merely one poet among others.

Among the questions that Eliot's essay suggests is, Why Virgil? Why is Homer not the classic ideal, for instance, and why is not the equally dead ancient Greek the language of the classic? For Virgil to stand as "the classic of all Europe," he must be *sui generis*. Eliot anticipates these questions and argues that "it is through Rome that our parentage in Greece must be traced" (*OPP* 73). His wish to erect a literary norm that possesses "gravity" and imperial power is better served by the *Aeneid* than by the *Odyssey*. Moreover, his ideal of a "common measure of excellence . . . in literature" (*OPP* 73) is best fulfilled by Latin. Eliot was consistently drawn to Latin as a means of escaping what he saw as the provinciality of a particular culture or a national literature. The catholicity of Latin acts as an ideal stay against the babel of modern languages and the proliferation of modern literatures.

In "What Is a Classic?" Eliot praises the *Divine Comedy* as "the classic in a modern European language" (*OPP* 61). Earlier, in the 1929 essay on Dante, he claimed that the latter is "the most *universal* of poets in the modern languages" (*SE* 238; emphasis Eliot's) for three reasons. Unlike the "local self-consciousness" of English, Dante's Italian sprang from "universal Latin" (*SE* 240); moreover, "the culture of Dante was not of one European country but of Europe," which in his time was "united" and in which Dante stood at the "centre" (*SE* 240, 242). Finally, Dante's allegorical method "was common and commonly understood throughout Europe" (*SE* 242), embodying a Christian theology to which Eliot was openly sympathetic. Why, then, does he elevate Virgil and not Dante to the privileged position of "the classic of all Europe"? The answer to the question is not just that Virgil is older and remoter than Dante and that his *Aeneid* is the founding text of an empire; indeed, Eliot's choice has less to do with Virgil's qualifications than with the regressiveness of any attempt to locate a pure origin. The need to specify an absolute, unique source of literary value leads Eliot farther back into the historical depths of Western literature, beyond Dante, to a moment before what he saw as the fall into dispersion of multiple tongues and literatures.

Perhaps another reason for Eliot's preference for Virgil as the dead father of Western literature is the fact of his secure interment, as opposed to Homer's partial resurrection in Joyce's *Ulysses*. In "The

Three Provincialities" (1922), Eliot praises Joyce in terms similar to those with which he later praises Virgil: Joyce has delivered a "death blow" to Irish literature as a local entity by taking "what is racial and national and transmut[ing] it into something of international value," indeed, of "absolute European significance."<sup>61</sup> Joyce has killed off traditional Irish literature – a good thing as far as Eliot is concerned – but he has also killed off certain literary potentialities for Eliot. In one of his "London Letters" to the *Dial* in 1922, Eliot implies that *Ulysses* has nearly destroyed the novel and is certainly an example of what "the intelligent literary aspirant . . . will . . . avoid attempting." For "great works of art do in some way mark . . . an epoch, but less often by the new things which they make possible, than by the old things which they put to an end" – in this case, "the old narrative method." Eliot adds that he "should be sorry to see this [old] type of novel disappear."<sup>62</sup> Moreover, it is possible to read Eliot's essay, "*Ulysses*, Order and Myth," not as a ringing endorsement of Joyce's work but as an appropriation of the "mythic method" for himself, even as an oblique way of distancing himself from Joyce.<sup>63</sup> Eliot's praise of Joyce as an international rather than an Irish writer, and, later, as a Christian writer (*ASG* 52), drafts Joyce into the service of Eliot's vision of a continuous literary tradition.

Eliot typically equates the provincial with the errant. To read a literary text in terms of its social or historical contexts is, in his view, to relativize its literary worth. He attributes such a relativization to a "distortion of values . . . which springs . . . from applying standards acquired within a limited area to the whole of human existence; which confounds the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent" (*OPP* 72). Evidently undisturbed by the implication of his own argument that the historical and regional variations of English are the source of its vitality, Eliot maintains his belief in the absolute nature of literary value by claiming to sever it completely from every empirical contingency – which, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, means from everything.<sup>64</sup> His attempt to ground literary value by anchoring it in a transcendental ideal or a truly classic text demands that the classic be uncontaminated by particularities, and hence that sharp boundaries be drawn between this central ideal and all peripheral, vernacular concerns. Yet the maintenance of such an ideal requires the suppression of the particular, local, and even personal interests that elicit such an ideal in the first place. In Eliot's case, his interest in maintaining a homogeneous English literary culture, bound by ties of custom and "blood kinship" and legitimated by an authoritative tradition, directly served his

own magisterial power as a poet and critic. Far from acknowledging his stake in the literary and cultural norms advanced by his writings, Eliot's work camouflages it in the guise of universal truths. In this sense, *After Strange Gods*, far from being an embarrassing anomaly in Eliot's corpus, is his quintessential work insofar as it is his most explicit statement of the idea of a proper literary community, governed by orthodox literary and social values.

Much of Eliot's later critical writings strikingly resemble recent arguments in the United States and Great Britain concerning the alleged debasement of literary and cultural values by multiculturalist and post-structuralist critics. The "culture wars" among academic scholars, fueled by Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, as well as popular enthusiasm for films based upon novels by Jane Austen, Henry James, and other canonical writers, demonstrate the renewed appeal of Eliot's defense of a shared cultural tradition. Arguing for the contemporary relevance – and the bivalence – of Eliot's critical views, Bernard Sharratt predicts that Eliot is "ripe" for reappropriation by nationalists and pan-Europeanists alike in our post-postmodern age.<sup>65</sup> That an American born in St. Louis would become this century's most prominent advocate of the idea of a unified European culture is, perhaps, one of history's errant, "cunning passages." Eliot's American origin is often, and mistakenly, understood as implicitly undermining his literary program. C. S. Lewis's complaint that "Eliot stole upon us, a foreigner," to foist the modernism of "denationalized Irishmen and Americans" upon Englishmen, finds its counterpart in those who, like Eric Sigg, refer to his use of American ragtime tunes in his poetry or, like Ronald Bush, cite Eliot's "Emersonian" ideas as antidotes to charges of his snobbery or Eurocentrism.<sup>66</sup> Rather than discrediting his cultural and literary values, Eliot's mixed, even impure personal history – neither a true Midwesterner nor Yankee, transplanted to a foreign country – lends force, if not credence, to his strictures on the errancy of the local.

Eliot's national roots have also been taken as evidence that his thought is indebted or at least congenial to American pragmatism. In his doctoral dissertation, Eliot argued that meaning arises through consensus within a "community," leading to Richard Schusterman's claim that this "practical idealism" is the basis for Eliot's theory of tradition and, later, of a "pluralistic" ideal of culture as a "productive tension" between unity and diversity.<sup>67</sup> However, Schusterman's otherwise cogent analysis of Eliot's philosophical ideas relies upon an untenable split between his religious beliefs and his secular thought; as Schusterman admits, the

“pragmatism” of the latter is based upon a notion of “intellectual virtue” or intelligence informed by moral principles (44–45). The racial exclusivity of Eliot’s cultural ideal, his calls for obedience to orthodox authority, and his wish for a unified Europe on the order of Maurras’s *l’Action Française* cannot be separated from his ethical high-mindedness. Likewise, Frank Kermode’s argument that Eliot admired the idea rather than the reality of empire speciously assumes that the former has no historical or political implications.<sup>68</sup>

Although Eliot believed that “the tradition” was threatened from without by the disseminating effects of proliferating local literatures (what are now termed “special interests”), “What Is a Classic?” demonstrates the errancy at work within the very assertion of a central, absolute literary ideal. Not only must such an ideal be vacuous in order to serve as such, but that ideal’s sacred fatality transfers literary energies into the debased, exterior realm, so that his essay inadvertently celebrates the demise of the classic. Apparently against his intentions, Eliot effectively endorses the dissemination of literary value throughout peripheral, vernacular literatures whose vigor stems from their freedom from the dead hand of the classic. Eliot’s elevation of Virgil permits a reverse reading in which the absence of a Virgil from English literature has given rise to a host of lively bastards and barbarians.

Eliot’s authority as the guardian of the literary values of high modernism is so firmly entrenched that it is all the more worthwhile to notice the ways in which both his criticism and poetry stray from the literary, social, and sexual norms that they are designed to enforce. Eliot’s interest for readers at the end of the twentieth century may lie in the manner in which his texts are faithless to the tradition and the values that they explicitly endorse.